

IMAGES OF NATURE AND SOCIETY IN AMAZONIAN ETHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This review discusses changes in Amazonian indigenous anthropology since the synthesis presented in the *Handbook of South American Indians*. The past few years have seen the emergence of an image of Amazonia characterized by a growing emphasis on the complexity of indigenous social formations and the ecological diversity of the region. This new image of society and nature is taking shape in a theoretical context characterized by the synergistic interaction between structural and historical approaches, by an attempt to go beyond mono-causal explanatory models (whether naturalistic or culturalistic) in favor of a dialectical view of the relations between society and nature, and by hopes of a “new synthesis” that could integrate the knowledge accumulated in the fields of human ecology, social anthropology, archeology, and history.

INTRODUCTION

When the *Annual Review of Anthropology* last published an overall review of the field in 1975 (70), Amazonian anthropology was entering a period of unprecedented growth: In comparative terms, this literature seems to have increased more than that of any other region over the past twenty years. This phenomenon has been celebrated by various commentators (40, 61, 117, 140, 151), who often mention a preboom collection of texts subtitled *The Least Known Continent* (87), and then add how fortunate the situation has changed.

The optimism is justified. If, as Taylor (140) observed, there were no more than 50 monographs about indigenous Amazonia before the 1970s, then the subsequent explosion at least quadrupled this figure. In the past twenty years, many societies have been described for the first time according to modern

standards of ethnographic writing; some have been studied by successive waves of researchers with different theoretical backgrounds; and for certain geographical areas the bibliography has since achieved an impressive density. During the same period, ecology, history, and archeology have made equally remarkable advances. This coming of age may be evaluated in five recently published compilations—Descola & Taylor (41), Roosevelt (127), Carneiro da Cunha (23), Viveiros de Castro & Carneiro da Cunha (157), and Sponsel (134)—all of whom present a good sample of research developments in different areas of knowledge about Amazonia, as well as various critical and comparative overviews.

The following review focuses exclusively on the more general changes in regional anthropology. The past few years have seen the emergence of an image of Amazonia characterized by a growing emphasis on the complexity of indigenous social formations and the ecological diversity of the region. This new image of society and nature is taking shape in a theoretical context characterized by the synergistic interaction between structural and historical approaches, by an attempt to go beyond monocausal explanatory models (whether naturalistic or culturalistic) in favor of a dialectical apprehension of the relations between society and nature, and by hopes of a “new synthesis” (126) that could integrate the knowledge accumulated by the various disciplines.

THE STANDARD MODEL

The calls for a new synthesis point to the obsolescence of the image of Amazonia derived from the monumental *Handbook of South American Indians* edited by Julian Steward from 1946 to 1950 (135) and from the digest of this work published by Steward & Faron in 1959 (137). Combining a schema of cultural areas, a typology of “levels of sociocultural integration,” and a theory of the determining action of the environment over a society’s “cultural core,” the picture of indigenous Amazonia that emerged from the synthesis presented by Steward and his collaborators became deeply rooted in the ethnological tradition.

This model presented the societies of slash-and-burn horticulturalists of the “Tropical Forest” as typological hybrids occupying an intermediate evolutionary position. Similar to the circum-Caribbean chiefdoms (from whom they were supposed to have borrowed a number of traits) in technology, from a sociopolitical angle, the Tropical Forest cultures differed little from the “Marginal Tribes” of hunters-gatherers of Central Brazil and Patagonia (136, 137).¹

¹ The Gê and Bororo of Central Brazil—“Marginals” in the *Handbook*—were reclassified as “hunters and gatherers turned farmers” by Steward & Faron (137) and placed closer to the Tropical Forest type.

The typical Tropical Forest “tribe” was organized in autonomous and egalitarian villages, which were limited in their size and permanence by both a simple technology and an unproductive environment, and were thus unable to produce the requisite economic surplus to allow the rise of the craft specialization, social stratification, and political centralization that had developed in other areas of South America. Steward recognized the existence of ecological differences between the riverine and interfluvial environments, as well as a certain variety in the Tropical Forest type due to different local conditions and to the relations with the centers of cultural diffusion. However, the overall impression was one of a largely uniform Tropical Forest: an environment hostile to civilization and of comparatively recent settlement, sparsely populated, sociologically stunted, and culturally dependent on more advanced areas. Native societies that had stuck to their traditional ways were seen as moving fast toward assimilation into national populations.

At the time this synthesis was produced, Amazonian ethnology was dominated by a blend of diffusionism and geographical determinism, following the German historicocultural tradition under whose influence it had been formed. Adding to the mix a theory of social evolution, Steward transformed this tradition into the new discipline of “cultural ecology,” which was to have a large progeny in North American anthropology and which has wielded considerable influence in Amerindian studies ever since. The heirs of Steward’s cultural ecology (and of Leslie White’s neoevolutionism) continued with Amazonia as their choice field for speculation. An example is the heated debate on the “limiting factors” responsible for the region’s sociopolitical landscape, which was to monopolize the attention of researchers of this persuasion at least until the 1980s (see 59, 133).

European anthropology began, with Lévi-Strauss (81–85), to break the hegemony of this paradigm before the 1950s were over, but it was with the publication particularly of his *Mythologiques* in the 1960s that structuralism became influential in regional ethnology. It proposed an analytical style and, above all, a thematic agenda that was to have far-reaching repercussions. Lévi-Strauss emphasized the cognitive and symbolic value of the material dimensions of social life studied by cultural ecologists from an adaptive viewpoint—relations with animals, origin of cultivated plants, diet, technology. Thus the conceptual opposition between “nature” and “culture,” which had underlain the deterministic theories of Steward’s heirs, Lévi-Strauss made internal to indigenous cosmologies.

The late 1960s saw the first ethnographies derived from British social anthropology, which until then had been absent from studies of tropical America. The landmark monographs of Maybury-Lewis (88) and Rivière (113), both clearly influenced by Lévi-Strauss, opened the contemporary phase of Amazonian ethnology. In the United States, ethnoscience and symbolic an-

thropology—complementary transformations of Boasian culturalism having certain affinities with some aspects of structuralism—had come to share the limelight with Steward's and White's cultural materialism. The wave of monographs on Amazonian sociocosmological systems that began in the 1970s (e.g. 22a, 28, 103, 129, 131, 154, 155) shows a combination of influences of European schools and North American neoculturalism, but no perceptible trace, except in the form of a hostile silence, of cultural ecological approaches.

Thus there was increasing polarization over the following two decades. On one side were the descendants of Steward and White, who adopted a four-field approach, were interested in great historicocultural syntheses and macrotypologies, and were guided by an adaptationist and energetic conception of culture that underscored its material ordering by nature and privileged the technological interface. On the other side were the anthropologists who followed a structural-functionalist or "structural-culturalist" orientation. They were interested in the synchronic analysis of particular Amerindian groups and in the institutional and ideological dimensions of the societies they studied, thus privileging the symbolic ordering of nature by culture (and thereby the cognitive interface).

Despite this polarization, certain aspects of the picture generated by the *Handbook* were common to both camps. Amazonia was still seen as the habitat of small, dispersed, isolated groups that were autonomous and self-contained, egalitarian, and technologically austere. Cultural ecologists tried to discover which environmental determinants accounted for this "simple" sociopolitical profile—that is, to what scarce natural resource (fertile soils, animal protein) it was an adaptation. Social anthropologists saw this situation as a nonproblematic given and attempted instead to describe the complex and specific cultural contents they saw as associated with this material simplicity. When they did try to generalize [for instance, Clastres (25, 26) and, on occasion, Lévi-Strauss (81)], they traced the autonomy, egalitarianism, and minimalistic economy of contemporary societies not to negative environmental limitations but to positive sociocultural ones—ideological denial of historical change, social resistance to political centralization, and cultural impediments to economic accumulation.

THE PASSING OF THE STANDARD MODEL

The elements that contributed to the progressive demise of the situation outlined above have been gathering for a long time. They derive first from a revision of the received ideas about the ecology and the cultural history of Amazonia. In fact, this revision is part of a general revaluation of pre-Columbian

America, which has consistently tended to (a) raise the estimated Amerindian population in 1492; (b) argue for earlier archeological datings; (c) attribute greater complexity to the social formations outside the Andean and Meso-American areas, upgrading various "tribes" to the category of "middle-range societies"; (d) underscore the importance of regional systems articulating ecological zones and heterogeneous sociopolitical types; and (e) emphasize the action of long-distance societal influences.

The other element responsible for the reformulation of the traditional image of Amazonia has been the consolidation of a theoretically renovated anthropology of indigenous social formations. Here, too, much derives from broader intellectual reorderings, notably (a) the critique of the classical paradigms of kinship theory, seen as relying on a regulative and mechanistic conception of social life; (b) more generally, the critique of the concept of society as a bounded and structured entity; and (c) the attempt to escape the classical dichotomies, from the "Great Divide theories" to the nature-culture opposition, from the antagonism between "materialist" and "mentalist" positions to the antinomy between structure and process.

What follows is an outline of the most important instances of these points in recent anthropological literature on Native Amazonia.

Human Ecology

The most significant change in the field of ecology has to do with the growing emphasis on the environmental diversity of Amazonia and on the correlations between this diversity and human activity. For a long time it has been known (74, 92) that there is a difference between the *várzea*, the floodplains of the white-water rivers that receive sediments from the Andes, and the *terra firme*, the uplands of poorer soil drained by black- or clear-water rivers. However, as Moran (97, 98) and others (107) have insisted, the region's pedological, botanical, and zoological variety do not fit into this simple opposition. In particular, it is not possible to continue subsuming profoundly different ecosystems into the blanket category *terra firme* (about 98% of Amazonia).

In addition, there is more and more evidence that in several areas outside the *várzea* the soil is not as poor as was once thought, and that in some areas there was intense and prolonged prehistoric occupation, indicated by the fact that anthropogenic forests cover at least 12% of the *terra firme* in Brazilian Amazonia (8). These forests tend to be favored by contemporary populations because of their high fertility. In addition, they support vegetational associations of great importance to indigenous economies, such as palm forests, Brazil-nut forests, and others, which should thus be seen as "arrested successional forest on archeological sites, including prehistoric swiddens as well as settlements and camps" (8:6). That is, much of the distribution of forest types

and vegetation of the region is the product of millennia of human manipulation.² Balée, who has drawn the most insightful conclusions from these findings, observed that Amazonian “nature” is therefore a part of and a result of a long cultural history, and that indigenous economies previously seen as instances of “adaptive responses” (58) to a pristine and transcendent environment are actually meta-adaptations to culture, or to the historical result of a cultural transformation of nature (5a–11). Incidentally, contrary to what one might imagine, Balée has found that anthropogenic forests have more biodiversity than undisturbed forests (12, 13).

The adaptationist outlook dominant in ecological anthropology has led to valuable studies of certain quantitative dimensions of the subsistence practices of Amazonian groups. However, there has been very little interchange between ecological anthropology and social anthropology; the two approaches are as incommensurable as neoclassical economics and political economy (56). This is no mere analogy. Adaptationist theories take for granted the marginalist postulates of resource scarcity and optimization of yield-to-effort ratios and assume an immanent rationality of an evolutionary kind, governed by thermodynamic parameters, whereas social anthropologists working in Amazonia have tended to underscore the structural constraints of socioeconomic regimes founded on reciprocity and symbolic exchange and have tended to emphasize the historical, socially determined nature of interaction with the physical environment (although, as shown below, some forms of nonenvironmental scarcity have been suggested as explanations of Amazonian social morphologies). In any case—after the vogue of the “limiting factor” and then the “optimal foraging” theories (for evaluations internal to the tradition, see 59, 119, 133; for a critique informed by a different paradigm, see 31, 33)—the gap between ecological and social anthropology has been considerably narrowed by the advent of studies of “resource management strategies” of indigenous populations (e.g. 106), which give pride of place to native conceptualizations of ecosystems (11) and allow “cultural ecology” to mean not only “ecologically caused aspects of culture” but also “culturally created aspects of ecology.” There are pending empirical and theoretical problems in this approach—for instance, the degree and nature (whether intentional or not) of human environmental shaping—but nevertheless it suggests a welcome general tendency of ecological anthropologists to acknowledge the formal causality of culture [or to use more updated language, the capacity for “cultural self-selection” (43)]. This seems to be part of a wider shift away from the view of societies as isolates in an adaptive tête-à-tête with nature toward an essentially

² Some, such as Denevan (29), have claimed that there were no longer any “virgin” tropical forests in 1492, which seems unrealistic.

historical conception of human ecology, which is beginning to bear fruit in Amazonia (15, 60).

Prehistory

It was in the very camp of cultural materialism that there arose the most current and widely publicized reaction against the view of Amazonia as a region unpropitious to social complexity. This is Roosevelt's theory concerning the várzea societies (119, 120, 123–125), which is essentially a reaction to Meggers's thesis on the environmental limitations of cultural development in Amazonia that she originally formulated in the 1950s (90–93). Confronted with the sophistication of the cultures that left the archeological remains of the lower Amazon and with early chroniclers' descriptions of the societies they found in the várzea, Meggers tried to salvage the theory that the region could not support, let alone generate, a stratified and politically complex society by attributing these archeological complexes to Andean influence, or even to Andean migration.

Oposing this view, Roosevelt argued that the várzea was able to support very dense populations with maize and other seed crops (119) or by means of a general intensification of production (123). She suggested that maize, rather than having been diffused from the Andes or Meso-America to Amazonia, may have been domesticated independently in the latter region and that, more generally, the Andes were not a factor of cultural diffusion for Amazonia but that the opposite was true. Although the várzea societies took far longer than the Andes to reach a high level of complexity, certain pan-American cultural features (pottery, sedentariness, agriculture) first appeared there. The late prehistoric societies of the floodplain, in particular the social formation that once flourished on Marajó island (400–1300 AD), were, according to Roosevelt, complex chiefdoms or even states of autochthonous origin that featured social stratification, specialized manufactures, priests, ancestor worship, and other so-called advanced characteristics.

Roosevelt concluded that the contemporary societies are “geographically marginal remnants of the peoples that survived the decimation which took place in the várzea during the European conquest” (124:57; cf also 122:130), having involuted to a level earlier to that of the agricultural chiefdoms after they came to the unproductive upland environment. Thus one should avoid the “ethnographic projection” (121) practiced by those ecological anthropologists who see the regressive simplicity characterizing the situation of Amerindian societies in the present as representative of the inexorable limits of Amazonian nature.

Roosevelt's studies gave much impetus to regional archeology; her view of late-prehistoric Amazonian chiefdoms is the most sophisticated to date and has been successfully received even by anthropologists who are distant from

the theoretical context in which it was produced.³ However, Roosevelt was not the first to break the traditional continuity between approaches that attribute to the physical environment a causal value in the interpretation of Amazonian social forms and the naturalizing ideology that since the sixteenth century has depicted the inhabitants of the New World—particularly the peoples of the tropical forest—as prime representatives of “Natural Man,” unable to attain civilizational autonomy because of their adaptive subjection to a hostile, restricting nature (31). Lathrap had already proposed the idea of Amazonia as the cradle of complex societies and a focus of cultural diffusion and formulated the argument against “ethnographic projection” (74, 75). Carneiro (for a recapitulation, see 24) had already contested Meggers’s notions about Amazonia’s agricultural limitations and offered a theory of the emergence of political centralization, which in fact is adapted and used by Roosevelt. And as early as 1952, Lévi-Strauss had mentioned the “centers of civilization” in Amazonia and discussed the “false archaism” of several present-day peoples (82, 86). As Carneiro observed, Roosevelt indulged in not a few self-serving anachronisms when she treated the Steward-Meggers model as if it had survived unscathed to the present.

Moreover, these theses face a number of problems. The central role assigned in *Parmana* (119) to the theory of technological change and to the cultivation of maize in the evolution of chiefdoms disappeared in Roosevelt’s later work on Marajó (123). The later work is thus left without any specific causal hypothesis, a weakness she herself had criticized ten years earlier in the work of other authors. In its insistence on a generic contrast between várzea and terra firme as the determining factor of Amazonian cultural evolution (119, 124), her model is outdated in relation to the more differentiated and less negative view of terra firme mentioned above and is a traditional example of “ecological determinism” (history seems to come into the picture only after the European conquest). At times the model seems to incorrectly assume that the uplands were uninhabited before the European invasion (24), or else that all groups that happened (or still happen) to live there were marginal peoples cast out from the alluvial paradise, as if there were an irresistible tropism in every society, whatever its regime of social production and reproduction, toward abstractly more fertile areas. The model also reifies the distinction between riverine chiefdoms [which Roosevelt compared to the Indus valley, the Minoan and Mycenaean city-states, and the Ashanti (124)] and the social systems of the uplands, past or present. It would be more reasonable, considering the cultural substratum common to all of Amazonia, to imagine a *gumsa/gum-*

³ See, for instance, S Hugh-Jones (66) and Rivi re (118), who mentioned Roosevelt’s theses about the várzea in order to suggest that the clan hierarchies of the Northwestern Amazon had a much more marked socioeconomic significance in the past.

lao-type dynamics (80; see 130:226 for this analogy in present-day Amazonia) subject to conjunctural contractions and expansions that articulated populations of the várzea and the terra firme in ecologically and sociopolitically heterogeneous regional systems.

The presence of “complex” developments inland from the alluvial areas, based on bitter manioc cultivation, is beginning to be substantiated by archeological evidence (60).⁴ If this supports the picture of a pre-Columbian Amazonia sociopolitically quite different from that of the present, it also minimizes the contrast between várzea and terra firme and undermines the simple deterministic ecological model. It seems increasingly evident that the emergence and persistence of “simple” or “complex” social structures—for whatever these characterizations are worth (smacking as they do of the old social evolutionism)—cannot be explained by environmental factors considered without taking into account large-scale historical dynamics and social interactions, as well as processes of political decision-making guided by value systems that respond to much more than extrinsically defined environmental challenges or problems.

As to her attacks on “ethnographic projection,” note that Roosevelt often—and naively—used ethnographic analogy in her own reconstructions (123), resorting to contemporary literature to suggest, for instance, that Marajoara society came close to being a matriarchy, which may be ideologically pleasing but [pace Whitehead (163)] is theoretically problematic and ethnologically improbable.

Social Anthropology

The major contribution of the anthropology of contemporary peoples has been in the area of social organization, which is given short shrift in the typological tradition derived from the *Handbook*. Steward (136, 137) attributed a central role to unilineal descent and believed Amazonia was filled with single- or multilineage villages. Lévi-Strauss, in turn, could not say much about South American kinship systems in the book that launched the theory of matrimonial exchange (85). At the time, they were little known and would have furnished him with more puzzles than solutions (83, 84). By the mid-1970s there was enough ethnographic evidence to warrant an evaluation of the “descent” and “alliance” paradigms in the South American context (99, 104). The reexamination of Central Brazilian societies (89) undermined or qualified their earlier characterization according to descent groups and simultaneously minimized the matrimonial implications of their pervasive dualism: Uxorilocality re-

⁴ Alternatively, we know of terra firme economies based on maize cultivation, though these cases, curiously, seem to be the outcome of processes of “agricultural regression” rather than of technological progress (see 10).

placed descent as an explanatory principle, and moieties were seen as regulating onomastic and ceremonial—rather than matrimonial—transactions. In Guiana, Rivière (113) and Overing (103) identified a combination of symmetric alliance, local endogamy, and cognatic kinship that turned out to be widely diffused throughout Amazonia. Symmetric alliance came to be suggested as an invariant feature of social organization in the whole region (114). Relying on Dumont's work on Dravidian systems, Overing, with much theoretical success, dissociated marriage alliance from any descent construct and from the segmentary society prototype. Later developments in this field (117) were marked by the exploration of the cultural idioms that counted as organizational principles of indigenous societies (105, 132), by local and regional comparative syntheses (4, 64, 115), by attempts to describe in detail the formal features and sociological implications of Amazonian alliance regimes (61a, 139, 143, 156, 158), and by the exploration of new analytic categories that might replace the notion of unilineal descent for true segmentary societies such as the Gê and the Tukanoans (66, 67, 77, 78).

For a long time, ethnologists tended to consider the village or local community as the most comprehensive unit of analysis. The need to describe practically unknown societies imposed this limitation at first, when it was not the simple result of an objective situation (because various contemporary native peoples have been reduced to a single village). In other cases, the view of the local community as a microcosm encapsulating the social structure of the people under examination seems to have derived from a reliance on native ideologies, if not from an explicit theoretical-philosophical position (25, 26). However, it has become increasingly common to emphasize the significance of supralocal networks of trade and politico-matrimonial alliance and to adopt a perspective centering on regional systems (for Guiana, see 21, 22; for the Vaupés, see 65, 71, 72; for the Upper Xingu, see 17, 94, 96; for Panoans, see 46; for the sub-Andean Arawak, see 110). The political picture associated with the *Handbook's* ecological necessitarianism and Clastres's philosophical voluntarism has also been subjected to severe revision (34).

There are three major analytical styles in contemporary studies of Amazonian societies. This classification highlights only theoretical emphases within a widely shared thematic field, and various ethnologists (including some of those mentioned below) combine more than one. The first is the "political economy of control," developed by Turner for Central Brazil (145, 146) and Rivière for Amazonia proper (115, 116), which shows the influence of the structural-functionalist distinction between the jural-political and the domestic "domains." The ethnologists of Central Brazil (89) have denied the ethnographic relevance of the concept of descent but have nonetheless preserved the analytical substratum of the classical Fortesian model, attributing to communal institutions (moieties, age classes) the function of mediating between

the domestic and public domains.⁵ To this, Turner added the uxorilocal control of older over younger men through women, seeing the wife's father/daughter's husband relation as the structural axis of Central Brazilian social dynamics and elaborating a complex theory of the recursive dialectics that generates the domestic (natal and conjugal households) and communal (moieties, age-sets) domains and hierarchically articulates them. Rivière generalized the model by proposing (in opposition to the limiting factor theories) that the crucially scarce resource in Amazonia is human labor, which generates a political economy of people based on the distribution and control of women. From this he proceeded to explain the morphological variations present in tropical lowlands by examining the correlation between the ways of managing human resources and the presence or absence of supradomestic institutions.

The second style is the "moral economy of intimacy" found in the recent work of Overing and her former students (53, 54, 100–102, 129). Influenced by the feminist critique of the domestic/public opposition (in particular by the ideas of M Strathern), this tendency has produced stimulating work on the social philosophy and the practice of everyday sociability in Amazonia, emphasizing the egalitarian complementarity between genders and the intimate character of native economies and rejecting a sociology of objective (natural or social) scarcity in favor of a phenomenology of desire as intersubjective demand. This style tends to privilege the local group's internal relationships—defined by sharing and caring between relatives—at the expense of interlocal relationships, conceived by native ideologies as defined by a reciprocity always on the verge of the predatory violence that also characterizes the relations between society and nature. It theoretically values production over exchange, practices of mutuality over reciprocity structures, and the morals of consanguinity over the symbolics of affinity. Although it rejects the notion of "society" as a totality embodying a transcendent, a priori structural rationality, this model, with its essentially moral view of "sociality," nevertheless presents curious analogies with the Fortesian conception of kinship as "Amity." In addition, in a certain way its critique of the public/domestic opposition leads to the reduction of society to the domestic level.

The third style is the "symbolic economy of alterity" of structuralist-inspired ethnologists (1, 22a, 32, 36, 45, 73, 95, 144, 154, 155). It has produced analyses of complex multicommunity systems such as that of the Yanomami [thanks to the outstanding work of Albert (1)] or of the Jívaro (30, 141), which by working with a strategic distinction between local endogamous networks and the politico-ritual structures of interlocal articulation, provided an

⁵ Note also the influence of the "developmental cycle of the domestic group" theme as well as the influence of a famous article by Leach (79) on these researchers' interpretations of the Gê kinship systems.

Amazonian version of the two-dimensional conception of social structure present in Central Brazilian ethnology.⁶ However, the group's orientation is clearly Lévi-Straussian. Interested in the interrelations between native sociologies and cosmologies, these researchers have concentrated on processes of symbolic exchange (war and cannibalism, hunting, shamanism, funerary rites) that cross sociopolitical, cosmological, and ontological boundaries, thereby playing a constitutive role in the definition of collective identities. This has led to a critique of the notion of Society as a closed, self-sufficient unit or monad, counterposed to analogous monads that serve them as sociological mirrors (156) or to a Nature that functions as a transcendental Other (39)—two recurring images in regional ethnography. This trend has explored the multiple meanings of the category of affinity in Amazonian cultures (a theme that also appears in the writings of such authors as Rivière or Overing, but in an emically "negative" form), indicating its value as a central sociocosmological operator (156) and emphasizing the dialectics between identity and alterity that is thought to be at the root of Amazonian sociopolitical regimes.

The most consistent attempt to confront the ecological and sociological views of the relation between nature and society in Amazonia comes from a representative of the latter—Descola. In his painstaking studies of the ecology and economy of the Achuar Jívaro (32, 37), who definitely cannot be seen as regressive survivors of the European conquest, the author challenged several theses that are dear to cultural materialism, demonstrating on the one hand that the difference between the productive potentials of the riverine and interfluvial habitats occupied by the Achuar is not economically or politically relevant and on the other that sociocultural limits on the duration of labor expenditure, as well as on the general forms of social organization and the conceptions of the relations with the natural world, lead to a homeostasis of the productive forces on a "low" level of operation, which is nevertheless sufficient to keep the group in nutritionally luxurious conditions. Elsewhere Descola has developed a general model of "symbolic ecology," which attempts to de-reify the nature/culture opposition by differentiating it into distinct practical-cognitive modes, according to the social regimes in which it is found (35, 39). In particular, he has contrasted the "naturalistic" mode that is characteristic of the Western tradition (where the relation between nature and society is metonymic and natural), the "totemic" mode privileged by classical structuralism (in which the relation is purely differential and metaphorical), and the "animic" mode of Amazonian cultures (where the relation is me-

⁶ The similarities between the two-tiered models of social structure proposed by the ethnographers of Central Brazil and Amazonia should not be pushed too far; in the former case there is a noticeable concern with totalization that is lacking in the latter. In addition, the place and function of alterity in Central Brazilian and Amazonian social topologies are fundamentally different.

tonymic and social). The notion of an animic mode might illuminate some traditional ethnologic problems, such as the absence of animal domestication in Amazonia (38),⁷ and it is generally very promising, though it remains to be more thoroughly tested in certain contexts where the totemic rendering of the nature/ culture opposition seems to be quite powerful, as in the Central Brazilian cases [but see Seeger (131) and Crocker (28) for more nuanced views of Gê and Bororo nature/culture dualism]. Descola's theory dialogues with the ideas of Latour (76), and it shows possible convergences with the nonpositivistic ecological anthropology of Ingold (e.g. 68, 69), two authors whose presence in the theoretical context of Amazonian ethnology has yet to be felt more fully, and who offer interesting rephrasings of the shopworn antinomy between nature and culture that was for so long the hallmark of Amazonian ethnology.

History

The historiography of Amazonian peoples is a fast-growing area (161). This reflects a general theoretical tendency, though a more immediate cause is the soul-searching brought about by the fifth centennial of the invasion of America. Professional historians began to work on the region. Ethnologists found that secondary sources were no longer enough and resorted to the abundant archival material. In turn, ethnographic knowledge has been applied to historical sources, such that hypotheses are being advanced to clarify information often of a vague and contradictory nature. A consequence is the revaluation of the ethnographic content of old sources, no longer interpreted as mere records of European prejudices and interests. The interpenetration of anthropology and history has particularly benefited Guiana (5, 42, 47, 57, 159, 160, 162) and the pre-Andean region (27, 109, 111, 128, 142), but other areas are also being well examined for the first time, such as northwest Amazonia (164) and Central Brazil (153), not to speak of peoples who have long been the object of historical interest, such as the Guaraní.

The growth in the study of oral traditions has generated some works in ethnohistory proper (16, 50, 63) that demonstrate the importance of a specifically historical consciousness in Amazonian cultures, challenging the traditional vision that reduces Amerindian memory to the timeless world of myth. The relations between myth and history have been analyzed particularly in the context of the indigenous experience of the colonial situation (62). The implications of these relations for the wider cultural history of Amazonian peoples are yet to be explored.

⁷ On the question of the relations with the animal world in Amazonia, see also the important work of Erikson (44). On the critique of the "totemizing" reading of Amazonian sociocosmologies, see also Viveiros de Castro (155).

The "historical turn" of regional ethnology has led to widespread interest in the interaction between native societies and Western sociopolitical structures. This theme, long favored by some local theoretical traditions (108), has been brought to the foreground by a metropolitan anthropology in the advanced stage of its postcolonial crisis. This change of analytical orientation reflects, in the case of Amazonia, objective historical changes: The massive incorporation of the region into the world economy that began in the 1970s has not resulted in the extinction or wholesale assimilation of native peoples, as was once feared. Rather, they are experiencing population growth, have preserved their sociocultural identity, and have emerged as political actors on the domestic and international spheres. Anthropology's response to this process has been a welcome breakdown of the traditional division of labor into specialists in "pure" and "acculturated" societies. That division of labor was characterized by an ahistorical approach, a view of native societies as passive or reactive entities, and by an orientation away from the present, whether toward a past of adaptive integrity or toward a future of disaggregation and anomie. We are finally giving up the conception of native societies as manifestations of timeless structural principles, which made social change a theoretical mystery, if not the exclusive result of determinant factors external to indigenous societies. The emergence of approaches that consider both local and global dynamics responsible for the trajectory of indigenous societies reveals an anthropology that both addresses contemporary ethnographic reality and the historical agency of native peoples. Examples of this new ability to articulate cosmology and history, ethnicity and ritual, political economy and symbolic analysis are the works of Turner (147–150), Albert (2, 3), Gow (54, 55), Gallois (51, 52), Brown & Fernandez (18–20), and Taussig (138), among many others.

Another factor responsible for the demise of the contrast mentioned above has been the progressive conviction that groups considered exemplary of a pristine condition when recently "contacted" by national societies have turned out to owe fundamental aspects of their demography, morphology, economy, and ideology to a long history of direct and indirect interaction with the colonial frontier (149, 160). The same may be said of the meaning and intensity of various practices seen as expressions of original environmental adaptations or immanent sociocultural principles, such as war (48, 49) or a foraging way of life (10). Alternatively, a theoretically sophisticated consideration of peoples that at first sight would seem irremediably acculturated has shown that they manage and preserve their identity by means of political strategies and cosmological categories that are very much similar to those described by ethnologists of "traditional" societies (54).

CONCLUSIONS

What are the theoretical and ideological implications of the new image of Amazonia as an originally populous area—with an ecology significantly changed by human intervention—and as sociopolitically “complex,” a picture that makes the impact of European invasion and colonization all the more destructive? I accept practically all of its features but cannot avoid a certain feeling of discomfort caused by the excessive emphasis on the distance between the indigenous societies as they once were and as they are now. The revaluation of the impact of the conquest seems perfectly reasonable, but its implied greater victimization of native peoples might warrant a degenerationistic view of present-day groups that would deny them any capacity for historical agency. Such a view would ultimately lead to the absurd conclusion (that of course none of us would subscribe to—but Amerindians have powerful enemies) that contemporary societies, since they do not represent the original wholeness, are expendable—that is, they may be assimilated into the national society. If “ethnographic projection” has its dangers, one should not underestimate the opposite danger of an “archeological perversion,” particularly at a time when native peoples are using their historical continuity with the past as a means of legitimating their existence in the present world political context to ensure their future survival.

I believe also that we should think twice before attributing any problematic aspect of Amerindian societies—as a rule, any aspect that is difficult to reduce to adaptive explanations or that we find politically incorrect, such as war—to the devastating impact of Western civilization. This kind of explanation, for all its well-meaning radicalism, tends to treat native peoples as helpless playthings in the grip of the all-powerful logic of State and Capital—as, in another theoretical context, they are treated as puppets of ecological or sociobiological imperatives. Caught between European (or world) History and American (or human) Nature, indigenous societies are reduced to mere reflexes of a contingency and a necessity that are equally extrinsic. We should perhaps recall that the history of these peoples did not begin in 1492 (on the contrary, for many of them it ended then), just as it was not from 1492 on that adaptation *to* nature was replaced by adaptation *of* nature—even if the effects of human intervention on the Amazonian environment have undergone a dramatic change in scale and even more in direction [destroying biodiversity instead of stimulating it (12)] since national states were implanted. Above all, we should not reason as though up to that point the indigenous populations of Amazonia were following a “natural” evolutionary path, determined exclusively by the interaction among technology, demography, and environment, a trajectory then truncated by the irruption of History.

It seems quite clear that the várzea was a densely populated area at the time of the invasion, that this region is the most propitious for growing cereals, and that the várzea societies showed more political centralization and economic specialization than contemporary groups. Almost certainly some of these contemporary groups are descendants of the várzea peoples, who fled into the upland forests to escape disease, missionaries, and slave raiders. It is just as clear that many of the contemporary foraging societies were forced to give up agriculture because of direct or indirect pressures of the conquest (14), just as it is clear that activities such as war increased in intensity or changed direction as an effect of European invasion (149). However, if Amazonia can no longer be seen as the exclusive habitat of egalitarian hunters-horticulturalists living in small villages, it would be just as misguided to take for granted the vestigial, degenerative, and marginal condition of the terra firme peoples. Above all, it should be stressed that such phenomena as "agricultural regression"—or, more generally, present-day Amerindian ways of life—are not evolutionary events, but rather the consequence of political choices (112), historical decisions that privileged certain values (e.g. political autonomy) at the expense of others (e.g. access to commodities).

There is yet another intriguing problem with the picture of an Amazonia dominated by agricultural chiefdoms. Much of the available ethnographic evidence points to the overwhelming ideological importance assigned to hunting in contemporary indigenous cosmologies (even those present in full-blown horticultural societies), a view of the relations with nature that privileges social and symbolic interactions with the animal world and in which shamanism is the central institution—here the similarities between Amazonian cultures and the hunting populations of the North American Subartic and elsewhere are remarkable (39)—and a widespread ideology of ontological predation as a regime for the constitution of collective identities (156). All of this seems somewhat at odds with the ideological regimes associated with agriculture and/or political centralization in other parts of the world, and it would be insufficient to explain this away as a cognitive atavism manifested by societies in "regression." If this point is accepted, instead of evaluating the contemporary societies according to a standard defined by the intensive agriculture and political centralization in the past, it might be necessary to reconsider the effective sociopolitical expressions of these old chiefdoms in the light of a cultural horizon that is still present. Further, if we accept (as I do) that the state of productive homeostasis attributed by Descola to the Achuar is intrinsic to this society and owes nothing to any post-Columbian adaptive regression, and if we note how similar it is to what is known about other contemporary societies, we shall be forced to reopen the entire discussion about what type of extra-technological mutation might have led to the emergence of the várzea societies.

As to the hopes of a theoretical “new synthesis,” I believe that any unification still lies somewhat ahead. Although researchers from opposite traditions, united by the unanimous desideratum of transcending the classical antinomies between nature and culture, history and structure, political economy of change and analysis of monads in cosmological equilibrium, “mentalism” and “materialism,” and so on, are certainly—and auspiciously—edging closer, it is difficult not to see the persistence of attitudes that were characteristic of earlier phases of the discipline. For example, one cannot help but feel that “resource management” theories are themselves adaptations of the adaptationist viewpoint to an intellectual environment that favors the concepts of history and culture; that Roosevelt’s critique (122) of Meggers’s “ecological determinism” does no more than transform environmental factors from inhibitions into stimuli, preserving the same reactive view of indigenous societies; and that Descola’s theses on the historical constraints of the Amerindian “animic” regime or on Jívaro homeostasis may not be all that different from Lévi-Strauss’s rephrasing of the nature/society contrast as an internal feature of Amerindian cosmologies (totemism aside), or from Lévi-Strauss’s and Clastres’s ideas (metaphysics aside) of the structural self-limitation that kept Amazonian societies away from productivism and despotism. I am not quite sure that this is a pessimistic conclusion; it may be the case that “allopoietic” and “autopoietic” perspectives on the nature/society pair are alternative descriptions that imply each other (152)—and, accordingly, that any synthesis must begin by acknowledging their necessary complementarity.

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